



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 1st June 2007

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I greet you with joy during your *ad limina* visit. This pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul is a privileged opportunity to strengthen the links of your local Churches with the Successor of Peter and with the universal Church. Moreover, your meetings with my collaborators enable you to share your concerns as Pastors of the Church in the Central African Republic, and to receive brotherly encouragement for your Episcopal ministry.

I thank Bishop François-Xavier Yombandje, President of your Bishops' Conference, for his presentation of the Church's life in your Country. You may be certain that the Pope is close to your communities and to all the people of Central Africa. Please convey to everyone his affection and encouragement for building a society of peace and brotherhood founded on mutual respect and authentic solidarity, and particularly to the priests, men and women religious and lay faithful of your dioceses.

You are obliged to carry out in a difficult context the mission at the service of the people whom the Lord has entrusted to your care. Therefore, to respond to the challenges that face the Church in your Country, effective collaboration is a guarantee of greater effectiveness.

But it is also a need based on keen awareness of the collegial dimension of our ministry, enabling you to put into practice "a variety of expressions of sacramental fraternity, ranging from mutual acceptance and esteem to the various manifestations of charity and practical cooperation" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, n. 59).

In placing your hope and your humble trust in the Lord alone, you will find the apostolic courage that is so necessary in the exercise of your responsibilities. By exercising ever stronger communion and an exemplary daily life, you will be witnesses in the midst of your people. On this at times arduous road, the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, which is still an indispensable guide, should be implemented with determination. Rest assured that in the exercise of your mission you are never alone; the Lord is close to you and accompanies you with his presence and his grace.

Peace and national harmony are among the most urgent challenges to which the Church in your Country must respond. The poorest, in particular, are victims of dramatic situations that lead inevitably to deep divisions in society and indeed, to despair. The Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops for which preparations are being made will be a strong time of reflection on Gospel proclamation in a context marked by numerous signs of hope but also by disturbing situations. I warmly hope that Africa will no longer be forgotten in this world that is undergoing profound changes and that genuine hope will dawn for the people of this Continent.

It is the Church's task to defend the weak and to make herself the voice of those who have no voice. I would like, therefore, to encourage the people who work to inspire hope by a determined commitment to defending the dignity of the human person and his or her inalienable rights.

These rights include the fundamental good of peace and a life in security. The promotion of peace, justice and reconciliation is an expression of Christian faith in God's love for every human being. May the Church continue with determination to proclaim Christ's peace while working for justice and reconciliation with all people of good will. I also invite the faithful to pray to the Lord for this gift which is so precious, for prayer opens hearts and inspires peacemakers.

By social institutions, especially in the areas of health care and the education of the young, the Church also contributes in her own way to building the fraternal and supportive society to which your people aspires. I ask especially the religious communities and lay people who are qualified to engage in this essential commitment to the Country's future to persevere in their efforts, never losing heart so that they may be signs of that trust which the Lord instils in every human person.

Furthermore, a change in mindset must be brought about to allow society to have access to genuine human and spiritual development. This long-term task concerns in the first place the family and marriage. By resolutely engaging to live in conjugal fidelity and in the unity of the couple, Christians show everyone the greatness and truth of marriage.

It is by a freely consenting "yes", for ever, that a man and a woman express their genuine humanity and openness to giving new life. Thus, the serious preparation for marriage of young people must help them overcome their reluctance to found a permanent family open to the future. I also ask you to develop support for families, especially by encouraging their Christian education.

They will then be able to account more vigorously for the faith that enlivens them, both to their children and to society.

As for your priests, I commend their generosity and zeal as they exercise, with your support and attention to their private and pastoral life, an essential responsibility in the mission of your dioceses. I insistently invite them to be impassioned by the proclamation of the Gospel, in fraternal collaboration with all the pastoral workers but in the first place with the missionaries and catechists, with whose tireless commitment to the service of the Gospel I am also familiar.

Personal friendship with Christ and in him, contemplation of the Father's Face, will help them find their own unity and the source of their apostolic dynamism. An exemplary priestly life, founded on the constant search for conformity with Christ, is a daily requirement.

Through prayer, rooted in meditation on the Word of God and in the Eucharist, the source and summit of their ministry, they will find the strength and courage to serve the People of God and to lead them on the path of faith.

The formation of candidates for the priesthood acquires an importance that cannot be underestimated in order to give the Church the priests she needs. It is more necessary than ever to be demanding as regards their human and spiritual formation. Indeed, since priests are called to bear heavy responsibilities in the exercise of their ministry, a whole range of qualities must be required of candidates to enable them to acquire a true discipline of priestly life.

You must be particularly watchful in order to ascertain the emotional balance of seminarians and to form their sensibility, in order to be sure of their aptitude to live the demands of priestly celibacy. This human formation must find all its meaning in a sound spiritual formation, for it is indispensable that the priest's life and activity be rooted in a living faith in Jesus Christ.

A sufficient number of competent formation teachers and spiritual directors to guide candidates to the priesthood is therefore a pastoral priority for Bishops so that an authentic discernment can be made.

I would also like to tell your young people that there is great joy to be found in responding generously to the Lord's call to follow him in order to proclaim the Gospel.

Lastly, after having lived a year which has helped Catholics to find a new impetus and a new Eucharistic fervour, the faithful's active and fruitful participation in the "Sacrament of Love" remains essential.

In this perspective, the pursuit of certain appropriate modifications for the various contexts and different cultures must be based on an authentic conception of inculturation, so that the Eucharist

truly becomes "a criterion for our evaluation of everything that Christianity encounters in different cultures" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 78).

Through their lively celebrations your communities desire to give a joyful expression of God's glory. May they always be correctly balanced with silent contemplation of the mystery being celebrated. Indeed, silence enables one to listen to the Saviour who gives himself to the celebrating community. Thus, an inner preparation before receiving the Body of Christ enables each one to receive the mystery of salvation in the faith of the Church.

At the end of this meeting, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I would like to tell you again of my spiritual closeness to you and to your dioceses. Persevere courageously with implanting the faith in your people! May you all be tireless artisans of peace and reconciliation!

I entrust each one of your dioceses to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Africa, so that she may be your protectress and the star that guides you towards Jesus her Son. To each one of you, to the priests, to the men and women religious, to the seminarians, to the catechists and to all the members of your dioceses I impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

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